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**BALISA, A COLONY OF BESSARABIANS IN BRAZIL.
THE IMMIGRANTS WHO FOLLOWED THE COFFEE ROUTE
AND THE RAILWAYS**

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Abstract. The migration processes took place in all periods, including for the territory of Moldova / Bessarabia. An interesting and less well-known episode may be the emigration of the Bessarabians to Brazil in the 1920s-1930s. It is estimated that over 10 thousand people from Bessarabia was left overseas to Brazil, settled in the state of Sao Paulo in particular. After a long trip, through the Czechia and Germany or Italy, these Bessarabians arrived in completely new environment and must adapt to climatic, natural and social conditions. One of the most compact settlements of the Bessarabians in Brazil was Balisa, an agricultural colony with the majority of Bessarabians. Most emigrants from the territory of Moldova were of Bulgarian, Gagauz, Russian, Ukrainian or German ethnicity. The historical-geographical identity of the Bessarabians is maintained until the present day, traditions, cuisine and memory of the origin still play an identity role for Bessarabians in Brazil.

Key words: Balisa, Bessarabians, Brazil, coffee, immigration.

BALISA, O COLONIE DE BASARABENI ÎN BRAZILIA.

IMIGRANȚII CARE AU URMAT RUTA CAFELEI ȘI A CĂILOR FERATE

Rezumat. Procesele migraționale au avut loc în toate perioadele, inclusiv pentru teritoriul Moldovei / Basarabiei. Un epizod interesant și mai puțin cunoscut îl reprezintă emigrarea basarabenilor în Brazilia în anii 1920-1930. Se estimează peste 10 mii de persoane originare din Basarabia au plecat atunci peste ocean în Brazilia, stabilindu-se în statul Sao Paulo în special. După o călătorie îndelungată, prin Cehia și Germania sau Italia, acești basarabeni au trebuit să se adapteze unor noi condiții climatice, naturale și sociale. Una dintre cele mai compacte așezări ale basarabenilor în Brazilia a fost Balisa, o colonia agricolă cu majoritate basarabească. Majoritatea acestor emigranți originari din teritoriul Moldovei erau de etnie bulgară, găgăuză, rusă, ucraineană sau germană. Identitatea istorico-geografică de basarabeni s-a menținut până în prezent la mulți, tradițiile, bucătăria și memoria originii marcând populația acestei regiuni din Brazilia.

Cuvinte cheie: Balisa, Basarabeni, Brazilia, cafea, migrație.

Introduction: Brazil and its national immigration policy on the first half of the twentieth century

With the abolition of slavery in Brazil in 1888, the newly freed slaves did not become wage labour. The Brazilian government, influenced by Social Darwinism, believed that Brazil would never be a prosperous country because of the high percentage of black people, which would hinder the country's development.

Seeking workers for the Brazilian coffee plantations, since during this period coffee production was the main source of the national economy, the government implants national whitening policies (“branqueamento”) which were to create favourable conditions for the immigration of Europeans, making its people whiter by miscegenation, and also to replace the slaves in coffee plantations. The best technical level and experience were considered to be free and salaried workers.

Through contracts with transoceanic shipping companies, people interested in leaving the old continent and “making America” were recruited. Italians, Germans, Spaniards and Portuguese emigrated by the thousands, hoping that the living conditions in America would be more favourable compared to the difficulties of access to land or even World War I and II.

The same thing happened in Bessarabia, where advertisements for America's beauties came as a new hope to the population there, especially for the representants of Ethnic minorities, as Russians, Ukrainians, Gagauzians, Bulgarians, Germans and Jews, who lived there and were under Romanian rule.

At that time more than 10,000 Bessarabians, mainly of Bulgarian and Gagauzian origin, immigrated to Brazil. Cocicov (2005) states that:

Precisely, in 1926, 42 families left Kiriutnia (Korten), leaving their homeland. 70 families left Hassan Batâr, almost 200 from Ciişia, 22 from Devlet Agaci, 8 from Baurci, 7 from Pelinei, 6 from Moscovei, 6 from Cahil and so on. or approximate data, as little as 10.000 Bessarabian Bulgarians left to Brazil at that time, mainly from poor families [2, p. 40].

Their journey began in their hometowns, usually in southern Bessarabia. Families drove by carriage to the Romanian capital, Bucharest, where public workers manually made the necessary documents for emigration. Future immigrants were examined by health professionals and, when released by them, set out for the capital of Czechoslovakia, Prague. Then to Berlin, boarding the North Sea port of Bremen, while others migrated via Hamburg. [2, p. 73].

Another group of Bessarabian immigrants, already with their documents in order, left their villages of origin and went directly to Kishinev and from there to Vienna, to later embark on the port of Genoa or Trieste in Italy, where an individual health record was issued, mandatory for boarding. For the issuance of this form, a disinfection service was carried out, which consisted of bathing, cleaning the head and clothes and also disinfecting the luggage, including vaccination. In general the ships leaving Genoa had as their final destination the port of Santos. [2, p.74].

The State of São Paulo as a repository of hope: the settlement of immigrants from Bessarabia

After having travelled the most diverse trajectories and being overseas for over a month in subhuman conditions, the Bessarabians landed in Santos. From there, they headed mostly to the state capital of São Paulo, which carries the same name. In this city was located the Immigrant Hostel, where foreigners waited for farmers or their representatives, finally looking for the expected job opportunity on coffee farms.

Encouraged by the rulers of the time, the coffee expansion occurred in parallel with the expansion of the railroads, providing conditions of production increase and outflow. Geographical conditions favoured the westward expansion of the State of São Paulo, giving rise to many cities. One of them received the name of Lucélia and its founder, Luiz Ferraz de Mesquita, started the opening of a farm called Fazenda Balisa. In order to facilitate the occupation of the area and also to increase its income, he divided his land into smaller plots, attracting small investors. One of the facilities offered consisted in the payment only after the first coffee harvest, postponing the buyer's financial obligations for about three years. This attracted many immigrants mediated by other immigrants, who had arrived some time before and already mastered the Portuguese language. One such mediator was Nikolai Daflov, of Russian origin. Through him, hundreds of Bessarabians followed their destinations to the far west of the state of São Paulo, in the southeastern portion of the Brazilian territory. [3].

Lucélia, home of the Balisa farm, is located about six hundred kilometres from the capital Sao Paulo. Before the final destination, the Bessarabians passed through other locations, as noted in an immigrant's statement.

By the time I came to José Theodoro in 1932, there was already a Russian colony at the place called Balisa, on the other side of the Peixe River. It was not even thought that there would be the city of Lucelia, founded in 1939. The reason for the gathering of many Russians in that place is that there was a foreman of a farm of this origin and he had been calling the others, scattered in various cities of the countryside of São Paulo... (Stepan Povliuk, 79, Bessarabian immigrant. Interview given to Martinópolis newspaper Folha da Cidade, from the city of Martinópolis, June 1997).

Having signed the purchase and sale contract, the families continued travelling until they reached the newly acquired land. As they were excellent carpenters and masons, they began the construction of the first dwellings of the Bessarabian colony. At first, houses were made of non-curved branches covered with clay, but soon they got replaced by plank houses and later masonry. And so begins the exotic experience of the Bessarabian colonization in the far west of the state of São Paulo.

The cultural and historical heritage materializes in the daily life of the colony

Regionally, the land plots are called “sites” and their area ranged from ten to twenty-five hectares. In the Balisa colony about fifty families settled. Cocicov clarifies that "the buyer in the act of signing the contract declares not knowing how to write in Portuguese".

The demographics of the Balisa colony consisted mostly of Bessarabian Bulgarians, Russian-speaking population and also Gagauzians. These peoples, however, had a strong contact with the Romanian language after 1917, when Bessarabia became the territory of Romania, with Italian and German during the long emigratory journey, and also had some contact with Brazilians in the Balisa colony, because even with the colony's geographical isolation, it was necessary to sell surplus products, consult with doctors, make purchases and other activities that required communication with the natives.

Often, when supplies were lacking, it was normal for mothers to send their children to the city's warehouses, taking a small sample of the product so that the merchant could understand what they wanted to buy.

After arriving at the Balisa colony, which at the time belonged to Martinópolis, my grandparents and my father did not speak Portuguese, so whenever I had to make a purchase, my grandmother gave my father the amount of money she believed was enough for buying rice, beans or some other product she wanted, along with a handful of the product, so the salesperson could identify what she wanted. That was the way they found to communicate, as they did not speak Portuguese (Dirce Povliuk Parra, 62, daughter of immigrant Stepan Povliuk, and born in the Balisa colony, in an interview given December 12, 2018).

After settling in the sites, the settlers made their respective residence records of the nearest police station, as the law of the period ordered. Due to the documents issued by the Romanian government, virtually all Balisa immigrants were registered as of Romanian nationality.

The settlers' houses in Balisa generally had four rooms. They were made out of wood and had a dirt floor, the roof used to be covered with French-type ceramic tiles, the doors and windows were also wooden and were usually closed with latches, which consist of a door lock with a hole in the middle, allowing it to rotate.

In the kitchen, there was always a wood stove, whose matriarch was in charge of preparing meals. The furniture of the houses was almost always rustic wood and made by the immigrants themselves, who had learned the art of carpentry in their homeland. The bathroom was built outside and at the back of the houses.

Next to the residences was a small, undivided structure, rectangular in shape and also covered with French-style tiles, intended as a shelter for wagons, buggies and ox carts. The latter was the main means of locomotion of people and the flow of production in the 1920s and 1950s.

In the background and near the house, traditionally, a small wooden shed was built, where were stored the utensils used in the field, carpentry tools, among others.

Near the site, the Bessarabians already established in the colony and accustomed from Europe to the labour activities of the countryside cultivated small gardens, which were usually under the responsibility of women accompanied by children and teenagers.

Activities such as chopping wood to use it as stovetop fuel in preparing meals were also often attributed to women. Mothers and daughters were divided to do household chores, such as taking care of the children, fetch water from the stream, prepare meals, clean and organize the house, wash the dishes and clothes, and feed the cattle.

The Balisa inhabitants were also well known for raising pigs. Renowned regional writer José Carlos Daltozo says that, according to reports from the city's old residents, it was common to find the settlers playing their "sticks", a collective of pigs, along the dirt road that linked the rural neighbourhood to the city of Martinópolis for boarding at the city train station.

The settlers had a reasonable amount of cattle and with milk made cheese, curd and butter, products that in addition to being used for family consumption, were also marketed in Lucélia. The Paley family planted sugar cane (*Sacharum Officinarum Linus*) and in a small local mill produced brown sugar and molasses, selling surplus production to other besiegers. The tertiary sector was small but met the demand of the local community. Balisa even owned five commercial establishments [3].

For a short time they produced coffee but preferred other grains such as corn, rice and beans. They also cultivated cotton and native fruits. In the period corresponding to World War II, almost the entire colony turned to the cultivation of mint (*Mentha Spicata*). Mint was sold to Americans, who used the oil extracted from the plant as a healing agent during the war. The colony even had a distillery, thus increasing the price of the product already processed.



Figure 1. Athletic Club Balisa Football Team - 1940

The colony even had a club for recreation, leisure and sports called the Athletic Club Balisa. Among some of the favourite sports practiced by the residents of the rural neighbourhood was football, influenced by Brazilian friends residing in and outside the colony.

Near the rural neighbourhood was built a cemetery, indicating the demographic increase of the colony. There were buried Bessarabians and Brazilians resident in the colony. During this period the child mortality rate was high and, especially between the 1930s and 1950s, there was a large outbreak of yellow fever.

While the body was veiled in the deceased's house, a family friend or even the family leader, usually the father would open the grave in the cemetery near the Agua Grande stream. The grave had a unique feature of the colony: in addition to the hole being dug vertically for about one meter, the settlers dug horizontally, already inside the pit, a drawer in the ground, where the coffin would actually be inserted. After the wake the body was wrapped in a few white cloths and sheets, and the ends were tied to two wooden sticks and carried by four men, usually the oldest in the family.



Figure 2. Home of Vazniac family in *Balisa* originate from Caracui village of Moldova

Forty days after the death of the family member, the Orthodox performed in their homes a religious rite in memory of the deceased. The religious in charge of this ceremony, usually an older member of the community, would say the prayers. At the end of the ceremony, the prayer received some gifts from the family for performing the rite: soaps, towels, tissues, chicken, lard, among others.

“Babas”, term also used to refer to midwives, also played an important role in the daily life of the colony, considering the weak presence of public health services. These women, often widows, still learned in Bessarabia the skills needed to assist in childbirth. A week before childbirth, babysitters rode on their donkey, or mule, sometimes also having a buggy, properly instrumented with their herbs and utensils that would be used during labour.

The “babas” would stay at the pregnant woman's house for a week or more, assisting not only in childbirth, but also in the first care for the newborn. The mothers

who had been accompanied by the midwife along that year religiously held a celebration in thanks to the doula. On the night of the thirty-first of October, they would go to the homes of their respective baba, bringing chicken, lard cans, sausages, pieces of pork, cloth, clothes, wine, kuaska (a beer brewed from the fermentation of sugarcane juice) and other delicacies.



Figure 3. Baba Snatera, Balisa colony 1930

At that night, the group of mothers celebrated with the midwife babysitter's day. The women spent the night dancing, singing, and drinking until dawn as a way of thanking the old woman for her services, and also for the entertainment of women who, under patriarchal organization, had few opportunities for leisure and recreation.

During the party at the midwife's house, men could not attend at all, otherwise, they could be expelled and sometimes assaulted by the women who attended the celebration, as their malicious intentions were always perceived by the members of this festive tribute, who soon tried to get the intruder out.

Although all settlers from Balisa came from the same region of Eastern Europe, Bessarabia, the colony was divided on religious grounds. A significant number of immigrants professed the Christian-Orthodox religion and an Orthodox priest came about twice a year through the Sorocabana Railway to celebrate masses, weddings and baptisms. The Orthodox did not have a temple in the early years of the colony, the rites were celebrated in the house of one of the settlers, but over the years a temple was built on the property of immigrant Jeremiah Poslednik. The difficulty of displacement of this religious, the distance from the larger colonies and local influences contributed to the weakening of the original religion. Many immigrants converted to Roman Catholicism and Protestantism [3].

There was also a Baptist church in the colony, which from the beginning gained many adherents, especially those who had been Protestant since Bessarabia. The wooden church was located on the Paley family site. The existing religious conflict in the colony

may have been one of the causes of colony dilution. The small unity of the group made it difficult to form local leaders, resulting in little representation in the municipality.

In Balisa, Portuguese, the national language, was barely spoken, because the geographical isolation and the high number of compatriots allowed the settlers to maintain their mother tongue, even teaching it to their children and grandchildren, as in the case of João Colomietz, who learned from his parents and grandparents the Russian and Bulgarian language.

The community retained many characteristics of tsarist Russia. Patriarchalism was supreme, constant drunkenness and profanity as well as threats, discord, insults, and isolation. Another predominant feature was illiteracy, even with the establishment of the first school in the colony in 1940 [3].

Often, immigrants came together to play World War I in the form of plays, in which several of them had fought. Imitating their weapons, they used hoes or broomsticks and handles. They would get very emotional, even crying remembering their past in the old continent, their relatives left there and also those who were killed in the war. Thus the settlers sought to recreate in Brazilian soil the reality left on the other side of the Atlantic [3].

Although the Balisa colony was an example of prosperity and development between the 1930s and 1960s, geographical isolation, Protestant-Orthodox religious riots, and frequent contact with native Brazilians gradually made the colony lose their identity and their population to be diluted among the surrounding cities. There are currently few traces of Bessarabian immigration left in the area, but there are still a few signs of such immigration in Bessarabian, particularly Bulgarian cuisine, language, customs and surnames bearing the "ov" suffix. Part of the descendants live in the city of Lucélia and in neighbouring cities, others migrated to larger cities of the state of São Paulo, especially those more industrialized.

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